SHAKESPEARE'S ITALIAN AND HEBREW;
EVIDENCE THE PLAYS WERE WRITTEN BY AMELIA BASSANO LANIER
by John Hudson

The Use of Italian

Older members of the Bassano family wrote letters to the Queen in Italian and younger ones swore at soldiers in the street in that language, as documented in police records. Having migrated from Venice in 1538-9 the family would have spoken fluent Italian and maintained it in the second generation during their life in England.

Established literary research shows that the author of the Shakespearean plays read the following sources in Italian; Dante, Tasso's Aminta & Jerusalem Liberated, Bandello's Novella, Cinthio's Epitia & Hecatommithi, also Il Pecorone, Il Filostrato, Aretino's Il Marescalo and Filosofo, Gl'Ingannati, Il Novellino, Il Cesare, an Italian 1530 translation of Plautus' Mostellaria and possibly both Di Sommi's Quattro Dialoghi and the manuscript of Scala's Flavio Tradito

For example one of the Sonnets echoes Boccaccio's famous prayer to his Muse. In *Il Filistrato* the master poet promises his Muse that if he is successful "thine shall be the honour and mine shall be the labour, if these words shall any praise acquire";

"Tuo sia l'onore e mio si sia affano
se i detti alcuna laude acquisteranno".

Sonnet 38 ends with the very same sentiments, as if the author had paraphrased a direct translation from the Italian "If my slight Muse doe please these curious daies the paine be mine, but thine shall be the praise:"

Julius Caesar for instance draws on Tasso's great epic about the siege of Jerusalem, *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581). For instance, in Canto XI the leader of the troops and his warriors are going up the Mount of Olives and the caves create an echo "*replicare s'udla/ od di Christo gran nome*" one would hear the replication of the great name of Christ from the hills. The playwright uses this phrase, creating the first use of the word 'replication' in English in this sense of reverberation. The playwright uses it to describe the enemy Pompey's entry into Rome and turns the caves into the curvature of the shore "To hear the replication of your sounds/made in her concave shores" (I,i,47-8).Two lines earlier in the play, the people of Rome are described as having greeted Pompey with a "universal shout" which comes from elsewhere in the same Canto referring to *"il grido universal*" the "universal shout" of a hundred soldiers.

Some other instances. In *Coriolanus* for example, the way that Hector uses the word 'whip' as a goad or incentive comes from a passage in the *Purgatorio* in which virtue is described as a whip or *ferza* that is wielded with love. In *King Lear*

the odd passage where Edgar meets his father, who is *sans* his precious gems (his eyes), since they have been pulled out, also comes from a passage by Dante. He meets Forese who has also lost his eyes "*parean l'occhiaie anella sanza gemme".* The playwright simply paraphrases this, in describing Gloucester's eye-sockets "with his bleeding rings their precious stones now lost" (V,iii,189-90). In *Measure for Measure* the image of hell as "a thrilling region of thick ribbed ice" comes directly from Dante. Another example is *Macbeth*. When the devil-porter at the hell gate says "this place is too cold for hell" he is referring specifically to the frozen 9th circle of hell in Dante's *Inferno*, which was the fate awaiting those---like Macbeth—who killed their guests, their kinsmen or their lords. Even the order in which Macbeth names his victims is taken precisely from Dante's account.

Sources; Gary B. Goldstein 'Did Shakespeare Read Dante in Italian?' *Elizabethan Review* 1, no 1, (1993) 61-62, Reginald A. Saner 'Gemless Rings in Purgatorio XXIII and Lear' *Romance Notes* vol. 10,1, Autumn, (1968), 163-167, Nathan A. Cervo ' Shakespeare's Coriolanus' *Explicator* vol. 57,1,Fall (1998) 7-8, Joseph Satin 'Macbeth and the Inferno of Dante' *Forum* (Houston) vol. 9, 1, (1971) 18-23, Kenneth Muir 'Shakespeare and Dante' *Notes and Queries* vol. CXXIX (1949) p.333, Edith Slosson Tyson 'Shakespeare's Macbeth and Dante's Inferno; A Comparison of the Images of Hell, Damnation and Corruption' *Iowa State Journal of Research*, vol. 54,no.4, May, (1980) 461-8.

The Use of Hebrew

Although no studies have been done on whether any Hebrew texts or sources are used in *Salve Deus*, the theology of the poem—which is an anti-Christian parody—is compatible with Marrano satire, and is also very close to the anti-Christian allegories in the Shakespearean plays. Amelia grew up in a household which contained Marranos as members of her family plus at least one servant from a family of Portugese Maranos which was documented performing a *bris*. It is plausible that such a family background would have given her familiarity with sources such as the Talmud, the Mishnah, and with Hebrew.

Concerning the playwright's ability to read Hebrew, in an article in Shakespeare Survey, Schelomo Jehuda Schöenfeld observed that In *The Merchant of Venice* Portia says "I am lock'd" (3,2,40) and "I am contain'd" (2,8,5) in one of the caskets. These are intriguing statements because it is her *portrait* that is inside the casket and not Portia herself. But a Hebrew speaker would know that PoRTia's name in Hebrew is spelt PRT. They would see the lead casket, know that the word 'lead' in Hebrew is YPRT (*opheret*--the first letter is a soundless '*ayin*), and realize that the Hebrew pun shows that Portia (PRT) is contained inside the lead. Schöenfeld's article gives many more examples.

In addition, Florence Amit has found spoken Hebrew hidden in the nonsense language used in *All's Well That Ends Well*. The interpreter says to Parolles, "*Boskos vauvado*. I understand thee, and can speak thy tongue. *Kerely-bonto*, sir, betake thee to thy faith..." (4,1,75-77). In the allegory in the play Parolles is a Jew. Not surprisingly, then, the nonsense language the interpreter is speaking is

actually Hebrew. If translated, the interpreter is saying something that makes sense in the context of the play. *B'oz K'oz* means “In bravery like boldness” and *Vah vado* means “And in his surety” (*vah* = and; *vado* = *vad,* meaning ‘sure,’ plus an ‘o’ ending for ‘his’). And so we get: "*In bravery like boldness, and in surety*, I understand thee, and can speak thy tongue. Similarly, *K’erli, “*I am aware” (*ki* = since, *erli* = er, aware, *li* = grammatical suffix meaning to me) and *b’onto*; his deception (b'on(na) = deception, with the grammatical ending ‘o’ meaning his. Thus, “*I am aware of his deception* sir, betake thee to thy faith..."

The playwright’s use of the Mishnah is identified in a study by Alan Altimont, and published in Notes And Queries. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Helena questions her beauty, describing herself as being ugly as a bear, while Lysander calls Hermia “tawny” – to which Helena replies she is fair skinned. The two women are then contrasted in terms of their height, one being dwarfish and the other a maypole. Thus the two women are successively contrasted in terms of their ugliness/beauty, their darkness/fairness and their shortness/tallness. In the Mishnah, in Tractate Nedarim 9:10, there is a discussion of when marriage vows are made in error. The discussion concerns exactly these same pairs of qualities, and they appear in exactly the same order. Moreover, although Helena’s absent father never comes on stage, he is twice referred to by name as “Nedar.” *Nedar* is of course the Hebrew verb meaning ‘was absent’—very appropriate for an absent father—but it is also a pun on the Hebrew word *nedarim* meaning vows, which is precisely the name of the Tractate the playwright is using.

Finally, in his book *Shakespeare's Judaica and Devices* David Basch has identified around a dozen allusions in the plays to the Talmud. However this work did not go through the scholarly peer-review process of a university press. Similarly Florence Amit has identified dozens of Hebrew transliterations in the plays, in her article ‘Apples of Gold Enclosed in Silver’ published in Mentalities=Mentalities (2002) volume 17, the journal of the Institute for the Histories of the Mentalities in New Zealand. This publication is not a Shakespearean journal so the article has not been peer reviewed by Shakespeare scholars. Although this additional evidence is suggestive, I base my case on the two published examples which have appeared in the recognized critical journals, and the example from *All’s Well That Ends Well*.